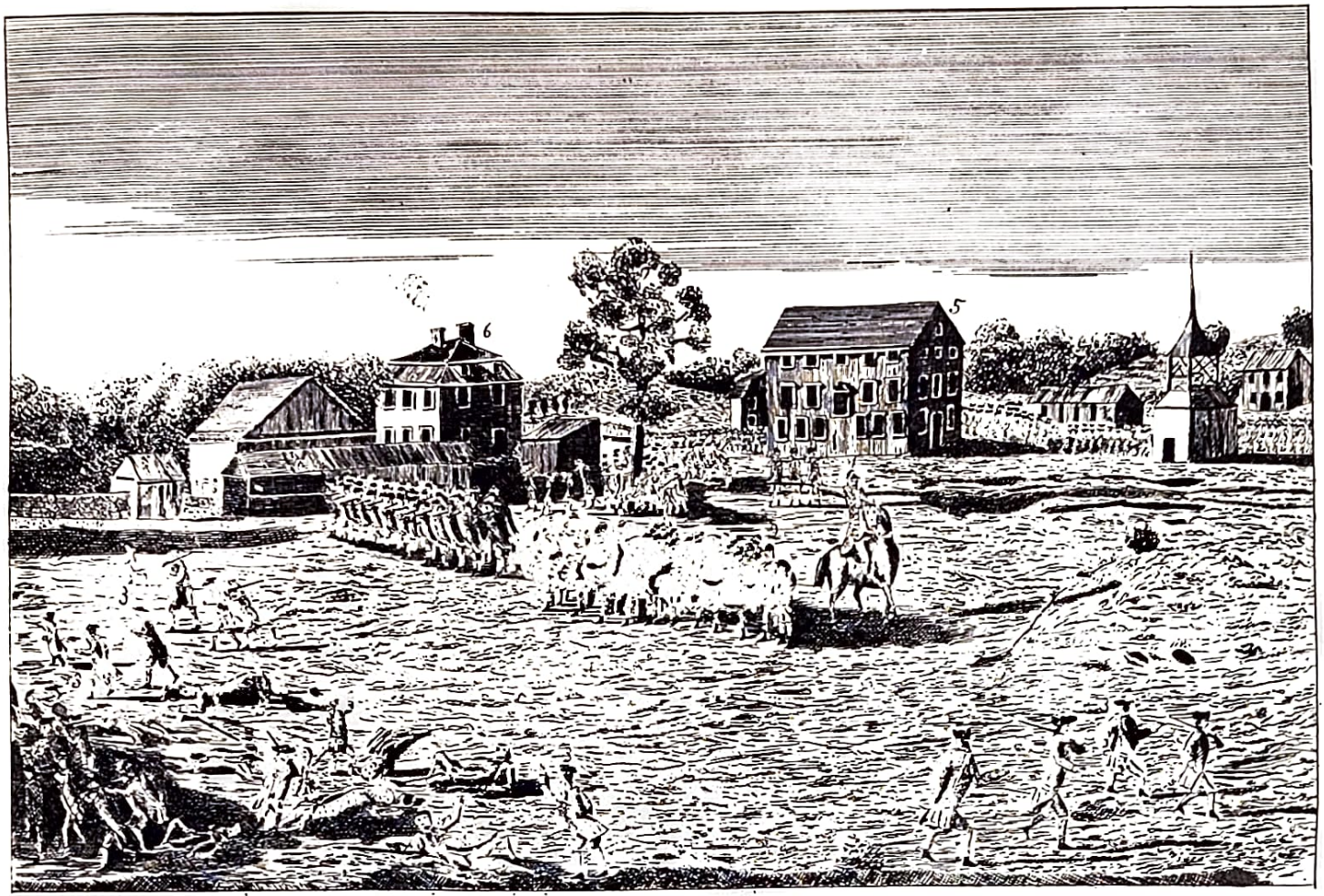
The History of the Pitcairn Pistol



Engraving by Amos Doolittle from painting by Ralph Earl

The History of the Pitcairn Pistol

THE STORY OF THE PISTOL, its owner and the fateful action make a fascinating vignette. Early in the morning of April 19, 1775, 800 British soldiers and marines hove into the sight of 70 or 80 Minute Men assembled on the Green in Lexington. The early morning sun was in the eyes of the militia men as they watched the lines of smartly dressed regulars march out of the east on the Boston road.

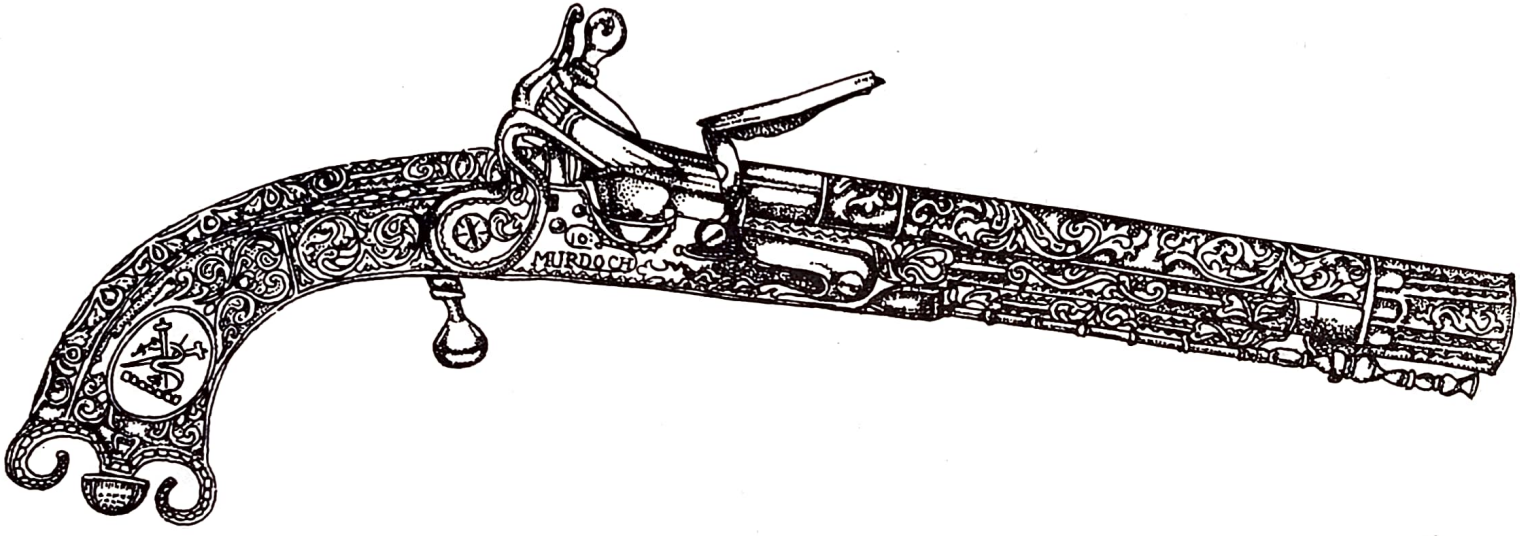
The British were out to capture John Hancock and Samuel Adams and to destroy the military stores of the Minute Men in Concord, twelve miles away. Thanks to Paul Revere and William Dawes, Hancock and Adams had been alerted and had made their way into the countryside. The Minute Men, although out numbered ten to one, momentarily barred the way to Concord.

This was the *moment of confrontation*. Captain John Parker had placed his command of Minute Men so that they blocked the road that the British must take to get to Concord. The fearful and outnumbered Minute Men were admonished by Parker with the words: "Stand your ground! Don't fire unless fired upon! But if they want to have war, let it begin here!"

Major Pitcairn, a Scot who headed the British force, galloped up to within 100 feet of Parker's front line and called out "Lay down your arms you damned rebels and disperse." Parker outnumbered ten to one and opposing untested militia against professional soldiers took a reasonable course and ordered his men to disperse and not to fire on the regulars. The men slowly dispersed carrying their muskets and fowlers with them. This was not to Pitcairn's liking as he shouted again "Damn you, why don't you lay down your arms?" At this juncture, someone fired a shot. It was either the enraged Pitcairn or his adjutant. In any event, we have documentation that *the shot was fired from a pistol.**

*"Amid the shouting and the rushing there came, suddenly, a shot. Paul Revere heard it. He had just come from the Buckman Tavern, where he and Hancock's clerk had gone to fetch Hancock's trunk. From a tavern window Revere had seen the redcoats approach the green, and now, passing among the Minutemen and carrying the trunk, he heard the shot and saw smoke in front of the redcoats.

"The shot appeared," said Revere, "to be a pistol."



Courtesy of the Lexington Historical Society

Pistol? The British officers were the only ones there who had pistols!

Others on the scene also thought it was a pistol. Minutemen Benjamin Tidd, back from carrying the alarm to Bedford, said it was a pistol. So did three more spectators, Joseph Abbott, Levi Mead and Levi Harrington. Abbott and Harrington saw British officers fire "a pistol or two on the Lexington company."

LEXINGTON CONCORD ALARM, pp. 132, 133.

None of the Minute Men were armed with pistols, nor were the British infantrymen, who carried Brown Bess muskets. Whoever pulled the trigger fired "THE SHOT HEARD 'ROUND THE WORLD." The single pistol shot was returned by a ragged volley from the retreating Minute Men. At this juncture Pitcairn gave the order to fire. His men fired two volleys, broke ranks to pursue the fleeing farmers. Eight of the Minute Men were dead and nine more were wounded.

In the melee, Pitcairn's horse was shot twice. The wounded horse reared, threw Pitcairn to the ground and charged riderless into the retreating American line, carrying Pitcairn's saddle and

saddle roll and the now historic pistol. While the American farmers were busy catching the horse, Pitcairn made good his escape to his own lines. The British moved on unopposed to Concord while the American Minute Men continued to gather along the route that the British would follow to return to Boston. The shooting started again in Concord. This time it was the American farmers taking potshots at the marching lines of British. The sniping of the Americans began to harry the weary British who had marched 22 miles with 55 pound sacks and 13 pound muskets.

The deadly fire from behind trees, rocks and buildings killed 73 Regulars, wounded 174 more—26 simply could not be accounted for. Some, probably wounded, remained in the farm country, cared for by the farmers and their families who, after all, had been British subjects up to that very morning. The losses of the British would have been much greater had not Lord Hugh Percy with a thousand men marched to Lexington where he received the exhausted survivors of the retreat from Concord. The fresh troops from Boston fenced around the survivors in the form of a hollow square, stopped the pursuing Americans with two light cannon

and cared for their wounded in the Munroe Tavern in Lexington before retiring to Boston in fair order. The opening engagement of the war had cost the Americans 40 killed, 39 wounded and 5 missing.

After the immediate threat of the British had been disposed of, the Yankees did what came naturally, they *held an auction* of captured British equipment, including Pitcairn's wounded horse, his saddle and saddle roll, and *most importantly the beautiful silver mounted and engraved all-metal Scottish pistols* which fired the shot heard 'round the world. Minuteman, Captain Nathan Barrett bought the pistols *Barrett gave them to General Israel Puntam.* He had come to Boston with his Connecticut militia to fight against the British at Breeds Hill. The pistol remained by Putnam's side until the war ended five years later. It was documented in 1835 by no less a person than *Aaron Burr,* who had served as Israel Putnam's Aide-de-Camp through the war.

Merrill Lindsay

Eli Whitney Museum
Whitneyville, Connecticut 06517